

The Quagmire of Philosophical Standpoints (Paradigms) in Management Research

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Abstract

In conducting management research, the researcher's stance of ontology and epistemology in the contribution of knowledge is paramount. The acknowledgement of such stance is imperative as it may have inherent effects from how a research is conducted to how findings are reported and evaluated. This exploratory study attempts to provide a brief discussion of the philosophical standpoints (paradigms) characterized in management research. The discussion covered the two extremes; from the early modernism (positivism school of thought) to the other extreme of social constructionism. Other schools of varying standpoints of ontology and epistemology occur between these extremes. For individual schools of thought (paradigms), the ontological status of social reality, the ontological status of human behavior and the epistemological status, has been discussed.

Keywords:

Philosophy, School of Thought, Paradigm, Ontology, Epistemology, Management Research.

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There are two characterized movements in the field of philosophy, modernism and postmodernism. As mentioned by Roger (1994, p.1), the word 'modern' is used in other ways, of which two are important:

- To denote the modern, as opposed to the ancient or medieval, era of our civilization. The modern era is held to be contemporaneous with the rise of natural science, and the decline of the centralizing tendency in Christendom. Hence Descartes is described as a modern philosopher, while Aquinas is not.
- To mean 'modern', as in 'modern art'. A modernist is *committed* to the modern age, believing that traditions must be overthrown or redefined in order to do justice to the new forms of experience.

The core belief in the natural sciences is as Phil et al. (2006) stated from the works of Ross (1991;350), the allegiance to methodological *monism* which entails the notion that only natural science methodology can provide certain knowledge and enable prediction and control. Natural science methodology seeks to give deterministic explanations of events (*erklären*) through the use of hypothetico-deductive methods (Popper, 1959) to give a generalized nomothetic knowledge. The particular school of thought characterized with applying this kind of methodology in the quest for providing knowledge is the positivism school of thought/paradigm. The belief of the positivism school of thought/paradigm that only this methodology is the right way to provide certain knowledge is known as the Positivists methodological *monism*. Here, at the start of research, there is always a priori theory. Then hypotheses will be generated and subjected to deduction and testing through quantification. The evaluation criteria for assessing this paradigm is via the use of internal validity, external validity, construct validity and reliability.

On the other extreme is the movement called postmodernism. This movement consists of diverse kinds of schools of thought that were constituted after the modernism movement. Postmodernism is originally a reaction to the modernism movement. Unlike modernism which comprises of the positivists school of thought, postmodernism is lacking a clear central hierarchy or organizing principle and embodying extreme complexity, contradiction, ambiguity, diversity and interconnectedness. Therefore, apart from the positivism school of thought which follows the modernism concept as in the natural sciences, all other schools of thought are to some extent, characterized under the postmodernism movement, which consist of an array of schools of thought and their diversities in terms of their ontological (realists or subjectivists) and epistemological (objectivists or subjectivists) views. At the

utmost extreme of postmodernism is social constructionism. Social constructionism also has its bases from phenomenology, which as mentioned by Roger (1994, p. 10);

“...literally ‘phenomenology’ means the study of appearances, i.e. the study of the world as it appears to consciousness. Appearances may be deceptive; they may also be revealing, without being identical with the non-mental reality that is known through them. (Consider the face in the picture: this is an appearance, which is genuinely and objectively there to the conscious observer. But is it part of physical reality?) To understand the world as it appears is certainly part of the task of philosophy: the most important things in life (goodness, beauty, love and meaning) are grounded in appearance. For phenomenologists, however, appearances are the *primary* subject-matter of philosophy. And since appearances are dependent on the subject who observes them, phenomenology involves a study of consciousness itself. So argued Edmund Husserl, the Moravian founder of the discipline, who wrote during the early decades of this century”.

Social constructionism uses the concept of *verstehen* in an attempt to view the world in the perspective of the subject. In other words, *verstehen* means, putting oneself in the shoes of the subject to see the world via the lens of the subject. This far, social constructionism holds a subjectivists’ stance of epistemology and subjectivists’ stance of ontological status of social reality, with a discursive stance of ontological status of human behavior/action. In this case, the core belief of social constructionists is that what individuals perceive as “real” or “truth” is an experience of what they have gone through with time, and which after some period, has become an agreed upon subjective objectivity based on their compromised perceptions, which they have cultivated through education, religion, cultural background or experience, which has socially constructed their reality. An example is, consider a drawing of a box on the board. Depending on the experience of people who have gone through education in schools, they will be tempted to say “it is a box”. What of the person who lives on the desert for the whole of his life and never seen a box before? He might be tempted to say “it is mere lines on the board”. From a social constructionist point of view, the “real” reality or objectivity is our compromised perceived subjective subjectivities, and for that matter there is nothing like “ultimate truth”. Henceforth, social constructionists hold a subjectivists epistemology and ontology.

In line with social constructionism are the philosophies of hermeneutics and interpretivity. All three (social constructionism, hermeneutics and interpretivity) incorporate the *verstehen* concept to various degrees of, and diversity in application. All three are built on a profound concern with understanding what other human beings are doing or saying. However, there

are certain permanent issues that mark their points of departure. As mentioned by Schwandt (2000);

“... yet cutting across these three philosophies are several perdurable issues that every qualitative inquirer must come to terms with using the resources of these (and other) philosophies. Three of the most salient issues are (a) how to define what “understanding” actually means and how to justify claims “to understand”; (b) how to frame the interpretive project, broadly conceived; and (c) how to envision and occupy the ethical space where researchers and researched (subjects, informants, respondents, participants, coresearchers) relate to one another on the sociotemporal occasion or event that is “research,” and, consequently, how to determine the role, status, responsibility, and obligations the researcher has in and to the society he or she researches”.

The philosophies of hermeneutics, interpretivity and social constructionism are housed under the postmodernism movement. Between the extremes of modernism and postmodernism are located postpositivism (modified positivism) which to some extent accepts qualitative methods, neo empiricism (named qualitative positivism by Prasad and Prasad, 2002) adopts the concept of empiricism (named after its founder Sextus Empiricus, AD 200) which is known for the maxim “quantifiability is objectivity”. However, neo empiricism rejects falsificationism to give way for induction of theory. As highlighted by Phil et al., (2006), the data of neo empiricism is often used to generate grounded theory that parsimoniously explains and predicts behavior (Morse, 1994). Next in the sequence between social constructionism and positivism is critical theory. Critical theorists are of the notion that the “truth” or “reality” is out there to be found (realist ontological status of social reality) but it depends on the subjects’ subjective knowledge in knowing that truth (subjectivists epistemology). In order to find meaning in human behavior, they adopt the concept of *verstehen* (ontological status of human behavior/action). Critical theorists start their search by viewing the world or the issue to be researched from the perspective of the subjects, taking the subjects’ subjectivities into consideration, and then develop an inductive theory which is critical to the behavior of the subjects, hence, the name critical theory.

Apart from positivism and social constructionism, all the paradigms in-between (i.e. postpositivism, neo empiricism and critical theory) incorporates to some degree of variance, the mixed methodology concept. A mixed methodology research is characterized for using both quantitative and qualitative methods in the same research. The pragmatic school of thought is characterized for adopting the mixed methodology concept, or whichever methodology that serves well in addressing their research questions. They believe that diversity in philosophical stand points should be pragmatically used to advantage, as both

methods accommodate inherent deficiencies and therefore combining them will serve to ameliorate each others' deficiencies. Henceforth, both quantitative and qualitative methods should be seen as complementary and not raging paradigm wars.

Fig. 1.0 below gives a pictorial overview of the philosophical standpoints (paradigms) in management research, showing the modernism and postmodernism movements at the two extremes, with some schools of thought in-between them.

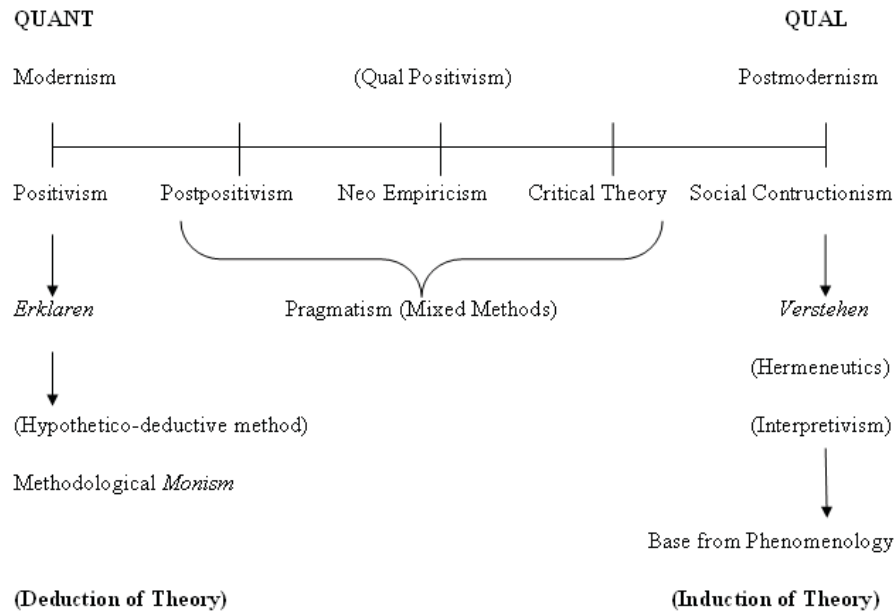


Fig. 1.0 Pictorial Overview of the Philosophical Standpoints (Paradigms) in Management Research

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